

## Looking at Gender in Today's China through the Eyes of a Romanian Traveller

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**Abstract:** The article is based on the personal experience of its author of working with Chinese women and men in academic contexts and of a couple of trips to China. It is also based on the natural interest in and readings of issues related to women and their situation in today's world.

**Keywords:** Chinese women, Romanian women, oppression of women, tradition, history, quotas.

My personal interest and fascination with Chinese culture has been long and probably started with Nicolae Milescu's story turned legend<sup>1</sup> that I read as a teenager in the early '60s. I never imagined then that I would be in a position to introduce Chinese language and culture seminars for my university's students or that I would myself visit China as a Romanian academic. And yet this happened, and I have to thank a lot of people for this, but I am thinking mainly of the many women, both Romanian and Chinese, who helped me on my way to offer our Romanian students an alternative view on culture, business and development to the standard ones that they usually get. The following ideas are the result of my two trips to China: one in July, to Beijing and Shanghai, and the other in December 2017 to Zhuhai and Ghuangzhou.

China is undoubtedly at the centre of interest in today's media and of the many analyses of the political and social pundits as well as of the research of academics. And yet in spite of a relative abundance of information about China relatively little is known about practical, concrete aspects of China's people, history, traditions or simply trivia. Most of what is usually found in the public space are pieces of information that are clearly biased towards the interests of those who launch and discuss them. At the latest communist party congress<sup>2</sup> the new leadership of the party was

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<sup>1</sup> Almaş, Dumitru, *Neculai Milescu Spătarul*. Bucureşti: Editura Tineretului, 1954. Though Milescu went to China as the head of the expedition sent in 1675 by the Russian Tzar Aleksey Mikhailovich, he is lovingly considered by Romanians as the first Romanian visitor to Imperial China (Zeană. 2010).

<sup>2</sup> The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 19th National Congress, held between 18-24 October 2017.

elected with no woman in the Politburo Standing Committee which is the elite group of seven men who are the most powerful in China. According to Reuters, only one of the 25 members of the new Politburo is a woman and lower down the hierarchy women represent just 4.9 % of the new Central Committee, in other words about 10 of the body's 204 members are women. Comparatively, there are five women members in the 24-member cabinet of the U.S. President Donald Trump and about 20 % of the U.S. Congress are women as well. In Asia, two out of the 20 members of the newly elected Japanese cabinet are women and so are the approximately 10 % of the lower house lawmakers. In Romania, figures are not so easily available. However, a 2016 report made by the staff of one of the women members of the Romanian Chamber of Deputies, the lower chamber of the Romanian Parliament, pointed out that there are 9 women in the team of Romania's president, meaning that 40% of his 22 counsellors are women. There are 8 women ministers in the Romanian government (38%), while the Romanian Parliament numbers 61 women (51 in the lower chamber and 10 in the higher) which means 11% of the total number of MPs.

In China gender issues have always been approached, if at all, in specific ways and are clearly work in progress. During communism and the Mao era (1949-1976), oppression was turned into opportunities not only for women, but for a large part of the population. Even if this may have happened mainly at discourse level. The 1954 constitution of the People's Republic of China introduced the necessity for women to have equal rights with men. Consequently, and based on this provision, Chinese women who represent 49% of the population got to be employed to a proportion of 46% of the labour force. If in politics, Chinese women, even more like Romanian ones, are only decoratively represented, in business and the economy they got to the highest proportion in top management positions than any other western country – according to some business consultants<sup>3</sup>.

It was always considered a misfortune to be born a woman in China which tells us a lot about their roles and positions in life. With some exceptions women had a much harder struggle in life against social norms and conventions which totally turned them into their husband's or their sons' servants. Even today, in spite of the official discourses, in spite of Mao's much-cited words that women "hold up half the sky", the fight of women to fulfil themselves as human beings has continued and has been very hard.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.laowaicareer.com/blog/women-hold-half-sky-gender-equality-china/>

Cartwright (2017) shows that at least at a theoretical level the contribution of women to the development of society was admitted in the overarching principle of “yin and yang” with the underlining that the dominant principle is the male one, while the female principle is related to soft, fluid, submissive, dark or poor characteristics. Cartwright points out that the status of women has always been so clearly low and well ingrained in the social fabric that in classical literature whenever a character was introduced it was by a remark like “unfortunately she was born a woman” or by stating that her present gender was a punishment for past deeds that she had done in another life as a man. One powerful explanation for this was that while a newly born boy was seen as a contributor to the family’s fortune by working and earning money and as a continuator of the family name, a newly born girl was seen as someone who would leave for another household and as such representing a diminishing of the family’s capacity for survival. Many girls were therefore abandoned after birth and those who survived were expected to be submissive and to embody virtues like faithfulness, modest speech, good manners and industriousness. The most common names for girls, says Cartwright, were names of flowers or birds or Pearl, Chastity, Thrift with the clear message that such a name would act as a fulfilled prophesy and as a promise for a good marriage and as such attract the attention of a good family and their son to make a proposal. Marriage was, however, a matter of family arrangements very often facilitated by a professional matchmaker, a very common profession along Chinese history and in Chinese society, with the bride and the bridegroom very often meeting for the first time on the day of the marriage ceremony. A very interesting note pointing out the total lack of subservience of women and their being considered only as a means to economic ends is the fact that if the groom died close to the ceremony the wedding could continue and the bride join the new family as a widow.

The wedding ceremony as such was usually a display of the wealth and resources of the groom’s family in which the bride’s family did not participate at all. Dawson (2017, p. 143) rightly points out that “the rites of marriage symbolised the fact the bride’s body, fertility, domestic service, and loyalty had been handed over by one family to another.” The bride’s family would receive betrothal gifts, the value of which depended on the groom’s family wealth and were negotiated by the matchmaker, and which represented in fact the price for the daughter-in-law. Dawson underlines that this practice was a “clear indication of her total subservience to her new family” and points out that a few days after the marriage ceremony the new couple paid a formal visit to the bride’s former family.

Divorce was possible, though very difficult, both for men and women. Women's possibilities for divorce were much limited to the husband badly mistreating the wife's family, not herself. While a man could divorce his wife if, as Cartwright (2017) points out, she did not bear him a son, had been unfaithful, had not shown filial piety to her husband's parents, had stolen, had an infectious disease, was jealous or talked too much. However, if the wife had no family to return to or if she had gone through the required three years of mourning for her husband's parents, she could not be divorced. Cartwright justly underlines that in fact all this meant that for the Chinese divorce was considered a negative action with undesired consequences for both parties involved.

Widows were not to remarry though among the lower classes this was often disrespected probably because there were no wealth implications. The social custom was that a widow could not inherit her husband's property, so she could not bring anything but herself and her work force to a new marriage. For the upper classes where property and wealth were to be taken into account a second marriage of a widow was clearly forbidden.

In general, the life of upper class women was more difficult and restricted in traditional China than that of the lower classes – especially from the point of view of what we consider today normal and desirable human rights: the right to movement, to marry and remarry, to decide on your work or interests, etc. In ancient China, upper class women were more controlled than those from the lower classes. Cartwright says that they were restricted to the inner chambers of their family home and their movements were very limited. They did have responsibilities in the household and those responsibilities included the education of children and the management of the family finances with constant approval of the husband for the serious decisions.

Across the long history of China, 5,000 years of evidence based on various artefacts and legends and 3,000 years of written documents<sup>4</sup>, women's status was one of oppression no matter of their social class. As Jacques (2012) states in his seminal book women had been oppressed during China's long history and the only improvement in their status started with the Communist period. It is important to underline that Chinese communism is an organic part of the Chinese tradition and history – very much unlike in the rest of the world. Jacques (2012, p. 111 - 113) explains that “the West, with the exception of a brief period during the Second World War, has, more or less ever since the 1917 October Revolution, regarded Communist regimes as the devil

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ancient.eu/china/>

incarnate. As a result, too little attempt has been made to understand them in their historical and cultural context, to appreciate the continuities with previous history and not just the discontinuities. (...) There has been a tendency to overlook the powerful lines of continuity between post-1949 China and the dynastic period.” Jacques continues the line of argumentation and correctly underlines that in order to understand the current state of affairs in China one needs to understand the whole historical and cultural context and not just reuse ideological clichés and theories that have been developed in the West to understand Western realities. Jacques quotes various Chinese historians who in different words give a relatively similar explanation. “A Chinese nation-state was forged under the leadership of the Communist Party and the guidance of Marxism. However, it had far more to do with Chinese nationalism, with the reassertion of China’s former glory and future modernization, than with the universal principles of communism.” [Suisheng Zhao, apud Jacques, (2012, p. 113)].

In the light of the above considerations it is interesting to note that Mao started several relevant and long overdue conversations out of which gender equality was one of the good legacies of communism in China. As in other places, for various reasons that are not relevant for this paper, communist China introduced quotas and other means to enforce equality and the results had been paradoxical. If in politics women are only scarcely represented and only up to a certain level, in business and the economy they are thriving and China has the highest number of women in senior management in East Asia. Jacques (2012, p. 113) underlines, along with other Western and Chinese analysts, that the significance of the 1949 Revolution was to open up China for its long-delayed modernization during which, part of the communist values merged with the market capitalist system to make up a flexible business environment which, among others, offered paradoxical but still effective conditions for businesswomen to thrive.

Lijia Zhang (2017) gives a personal explanation of the situation in China underlining that reforms offered opportunities for both men and women, but they had been also the causes for setbacks in terms of gender equality. She points out that as almost everywhere in the world the income gap between men and women became larger during the last three decades. “Prostitution has made a spectacular return and the rich and powerful men once again boast to have *ernai* — the modern version of concubines. And female graduates have a much harder time in finding employment.” And she points out yet again the role of government which has left some of its responsibilities to the market by underlining that “the market doesn’t always treat women kindly.”

She points out the positive aspects and the hope for improvement as “Chinese women have started to take the matters into their own hands. They’ve set up NGOs, fighting for women’s rights in different ways. In recent years, I’ve noticed increased feminist activism.” In her enumeration of areas in which Chinese women protest one can have a glimpse into a very different society and another world in which still some of the issues are as universal as ever. “Women have bravely dressed up in bloodied wedding gowns to protest against domestic violence, shaving off their hair, silently voicing their anger against the discrimination in university admission standards, or filing lawsuits against discriminatory employers. Early this year, I marched for a week in central China with a young feminist friend. She walked all the way from Beijing to Guangzhou<sup>5</sup>, in protest against child sex abuse.”

The Romanian situation is somehow different, and of course we all have our own personal stories, which we usually consider relevant, but as Marinescu points out irrespective of political contexts the communist states moulded women and men into gender roles suited to the states’ policies and interests. Whether those interests and the public agenda have met the real needs of women and men— that is a totally different issue and leads to another discussion far beyond gender and related issues. And Marinescu concludes her brief study by correctly underlining that in communism gender representation was used in principle to increase the state and party power and to legitimate a power discourse which oppressed both genders rather than emancipate. In post-communist Romania the situation is more fragmented, and a lot of research and data collection are needed to document what is happening.

Some of the most vivid memories I have from my recent Chinese trips are of the narratives I listened to from the many women I met. On so many diverse topics, but somehow making up through words and also through silences a kaleidoscopic picture of the strange and hard life of women in China and of their incredible strength and fragility, their apparent obedience to social norms, their adventurous spirit that nowadays finds ways to dream of their constant desire for self-improvement as human beings. Strange and also familiar to my Romanian eyes.

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<sup>5</sup> 1,885 kilometers according to <https://www.distancefromto.net/distance-from-beijing-to-guangzhou-cn>

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